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May 30, 1996

[My memory of the following episode is quite clear. It seems to be entirely unknown to scholars and missing from any official account of the period. I present it as new data. Its bearing on other matters for which there is official record is discussed later.]

In the fall of 1964, not long after the Chinese had conducted their first nuclear test [October 16), John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, held a staff meeting with his deputies which I attended as his Special Assistant.

In the course of the meeting he told us that the Indian Government had requested help from the US in detonating as soon as possible a nuclear device, to counter the increase in China's prestige in Asia and in the Third World. McNaughton said that Rusk supported this request, and that McNamara had agreed to join Rusk in this recommendation to the President.

[These are the two points for which there is no other evidence in existing official records, scholarship or memoirs: such an Indian request, and Rusk's initial proposed response. However, I'm confident of my memory of what McNaughton told us,

and of our reaction. Seaborg's memoirs do recount Rusk's attitudes to the notion of an Indian bomb--without mentioning a specific Indian request--in the same terms as McNaughton's below, during the contemporaneous proceedings of the Gilpatric Committee.]

McNaughton did not tell us, and I didn't hear subsequently, the precise terms of this request, exactly what sort of US "help" might have been involved, and what the channel for the request was or who made it to whom. But all subsequent discussion among McNaughton's staff presumed our common understanding that an actual request had been made, not just an exploratory discussion, and that Rusk definitely favored it. As it was put to us, the decision had been made by Rusk and McNamara to recommend to the President that he approve the Indian request.

We were not being asked for input on this issue, we were merely being informed of it. Presumably the Defense Department, and some of us, would be involved in discussions of how to meet the request. We didn't get into that in this meeting, though there was some mention that the fastest and easiest way would be for the US effectively to give them a device and conduct an explosion for them on a covert basis, presenting it to the world as an Indian achievement.

We presumed--perhaps wrongly [see the discussion in Seaborg's

diary and memoir of this period]--that McNamara's predilection would have been against such aid, on proliferation grounds, but we got the impression from McNaughton that McNamara had deferred to Rusk and the State Department on this.

Most of us questioned the wisdom of this. We asked why Rusk took the position he did. McNaughton told us that Rusk's attitude was: "If our enemies have the bomb, why shouldn't our friends have it?" (These were McNaughton's exact words--I remember clearly--in describing Rusk's "position." I don't know if he heard them directly from Rusk in any meeting: probably not. My impression at the time was that he had been briefed on this discussion by McNamara, and that he was relaying to us McNamara's account to him. Seaborg's account of Rusk's attitudes corresponds closely to this.)

We could think of some obvious answers to Rusk's question, and someone brought up two of them: Japan, and Germany. If India (far from one of our closest "friends") could explode a device, wouldn't Japan feel compelled to demonstrate the same capability, for similar reasons? And if Japan did so, nine years after World War II, wouldn't Germany want to do the same?

McNaughton said that both of these points had come up in the discussion with the State Department, and that Rusk's reaction was: "Well, why not?" The same principle was involved: "If our

enemies--now China as well as the Soviet Union--have it, why not our friends?"

We didn't agree that this was an unanswerable question, but we also knew--from McNaughton--that McNamara didn't like to reconsider a question once he had arrived at a position, and that McNaughton was extremely loath to ask him to do it. Nevertheless, we all felt uneasy about what we saw as a bad shift in policy and a dangerous precedent, as we discovered when we talked among ourselves after that meeting.

Finally, within a day or so, we did something that we had never done before or did again. We asked our boss for another meeting, and we presented to him our joint opinion that he should, on this occasion, reopen the issue with McNamara and urge him to reopen discussion with Rusk and reconsider the decision. We argued that we weren't convinced that Rusk or State had given enough consideration to the possible negative consequences of this decision, and that the issue was too serious to accept it as settled already without more analysis and debate.

McNaughton didn't have to remind us of his reluctance to reopen a question like this with McNamara; he knew we all knew that. For that very reason he was impressed by the concern we evidenced by our initiative with him and our solid front, as well as by our substantive arguments. As was his nature, he rehearsed

aloud how he could put it to McNamara: "I have a brilliant team of deputies, and on this one occasion they all felt so strongly that they felt they had to urge me to come back to you and ask you to reopen this with Rusk...I have to take their arguments seriously..." He told us he would do it.

Soon after he told us that he had raised it with McNamara who had agreed to reopen the question with Rusk. (In my year as Special Assistant, this was one of only two or three cases where he told me that a suggestion that I had specifically pressed had been approved by McNamara. Incidentally, this was really a joint position of the deputies and me; I don't recall feeling any more strongly about it than they did or playing a special role. Alvin Friedman, for example, who had been my predecessor as Special Assistant and who was now Deputy Assistant Secretary for Plans and Policy, felt very strongly, and I remember him being very articulate in the second meeting with McNaughton),

I was told that the recommendation on the Indian request had been put on hold and that there would be further discussion. Later, I heard of the existence of the Gilpatric Committee which was addressing the whole issue of US policy on proliferation. It was my impression at the time, which may or may not have had any valid basis, that the formation of this committee was a response to our initiative, as presented by McNamara to Rusk (presumably as his own). But that impression was simply based on the timing and

on my being told that the conclusions of the Gilpatric Committee would settle this issue. I didn't read the Report at the time in 1965--my first knowledge of its detailed recommendations was in the Seaborg memoir which I read about 1992, after which I got hold of the declassified version of the Report.

I did hear in the spring of 1965 that the Gilpatric Committee had come down essentially on our side, in opposing any US support to any proliferation, even among friends, but that the President had basically shelved its specific recommendations.

Seaborg's account is crucial for an understanding of the positions of Rusk, and perhaps McNamara, at that time. His description of Rusk's attitude is entirely consistent from we heard from McNaughton at the time. However, Seaborg says nothing about a definite request from India for help, then or later, nor a tentative decision by Rusk on it. On that point this recollection supplements the Seaborg discussion.

May 26-1996: It Can All come Back

It was like a miracle that the Cold War ended in the first half of the last decade, and with it the mutual US-Soviet nuclear postures that had given us a serious chance of all-out nuclear war. The configuration of events and of people, their motives, expectations and policies, that led to this dismantling of postures and this retreat from ultimate danger were individually unprecedented and unforeseeable, as were the overall results.

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The ebbing of the danger has been followed by a preoccupation with other concerns, without any attempt to examine, in retrospect, how the world had come to such a perilous state over the previous half-century. There has been no "post-mortem" (as the intelligence community calls its occasional efforts to discover the causes of an intelligence failure) to help us understand how such a global insanity developed in the first place, so as better to prevent it from happening again.

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We-the states, the publics, NGOs-are acting as if a Cold War, with a nuclear buildup, ✓
hair-trigger alert postures
f, imminent
danger of global catastrophe, could never return, even in the longTMrun, or at least as if there were no short-run danger at all of moves in that direction.

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The mood is like that that Camus describes at the end of ✓
The
Plague
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, when the outbreak of plague has subsided and most people are inclined to ignore the reality that the plague never really disappears entirely but waits its occasion for a return (when all the human behavior that aided its appearance or retarded an effective response to it can be expected to be reproduced). Camus was referring, evidently, to an outbreak of fascist-like tyranny. But the metaphor can apply to the nuclear danger.

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There has never been an adequate understanding, even among specialists and far less in the public or Congress, of the historical and social process by which the danger of all-out nuclear war emerged. Thus there is little basis for predicting or protecting against its reemergence.

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Meanwhile, many of the elements that contributed to that danger still exist, and a number of them have shown dangerous activity in that direction just in the last few years (the Clinton Administration!) or even months.

[move against NFU, toward SDI, rejection of Vance assurances last year 1995...

So far as my own work is concerned, all these prospects seem to me to put a premium on spelling out in my memoir what I learned and experienced of the events that produced in the first place the moral and social catastrophe of our recent nuclear posture. That seems the best way I could contribute to an understanding of the last half century that might help us avert a renewal of the Race to Oblivion.

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(To the extent that this concern pushes me toward a nuclear memoir, as part of or overlapping with my overall memoir, it may be appropriate to seek grant funding as an alternative to an advance)

{Saturday, October 1, 2011: 15 years go!}